

Public Journalism and Political Knowledge

Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Robert N. Roberts; Lanham, MA, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, 198 pages

Public journalism is a fairly recent phenomenon, having been formally articulated in practice in the United States for only about the past ten years. Nevertheless, the opinions of most journalists tend to be fairly polarized: journalists either embrace public journalism as an appropriate strategy to “reconnect” with communities and citizens, or they reject it as an inappropriate departure from traditional journalistic standards of editorial detachment and subjectivity.

Anthony Eksterowicz and Robert Roberts, both professors of political science at James Madison University, have assembled a very concise, articulate, and intelligent set of writings on public journalism (also sometimes referred to as civic journalism). The editors could have acknowledged that most journalists have strong opinions on the subject and, as a result, taken the easy way out—by assembling a body of work that took one position or the other. In a sense they have done that, but in a scholarly and appropriate way. This book most certainly *does* take a favorable stance on public journalism but, in so doing, it also fully and fairly addresses every major argument levied against the genre (at least every one that this long-time journalist could think of).

Where traditional journalistic practice conceptualizes reporters and editors as detached observers who subsequently report on public events, public journalism puts journalists right in the middle of the action. The public journalist is expected to identify and frame the important issues for citizens and then “form partnerships with civic groups, universities, and local governments for the purposes of reporting and reform.” Thus, public journalism “emphasizes citizen participation as a virtue that eventually enhances representative government.”

Public Journalism and Political Knowledge is made up of nine chapters, each addressing a different aspect of, or case study in, public journalism. Its three sections address the origins

of public journalism, the practice of public journalism, and public journalism's impact and future potential. Chapter authors include a former National Public Radio executive, a former CBS News correspondent, several university mass communication professors, political scientists, and two newspaper editors whose publications were among the first to adopt public journalism. The authors represent a good mix of scholarly writers who also have practical expertise on the subject.

Chapters take a narrative/case study orientation, blending quantitative data with qualitative explanations. All in all, the chapters are quite readable, with only a couple of exceptions. Chapter 6 addresses the public journalism-oriented "Election Projects" of the mid-1990s developed by National Public Radio, and gets deeper into the details than necessary for most readers. Chapter 8 analyzes the public's political knowledge and action, and again, probably goes deeper than most readers will need. On the whole, though, the chapters are well-written. While thoroughly favorable to public journalism, each writer acknowledges the limitations of the framework and recognizes that the newness of this perspective leaves many questions about it unanswered at this point in time.

Public Journalism and Political Knowledge is biased in favor of public journalism, but fair in its presentation. The book deals with the subject in a scholarly appropriate way without the "academic elitist" lingo so many authors use. A variety of case studies illustrating applications of public journalism in a wide range of professional situations builds credibility for the book's point of view. Above all, Eksterowicz and Roberts acknowledge that there is much more to learn about public journalism, so this book is not the final word on the subject.

There are some weaknesses in the text's presentation. Aside from its editorial bias, the chapters amount to not much more than "expert narratives"—which is exactly what public journalism seeks to *avoid* in its empowerment of the public. There are lots of statistics about newspaper readership, lots of information about what the public thinks of politics and community action, and a fair amount of anecdotal evidence of the public's reaction to public journalism. But there's really no *public* narrative. What do people think about this type of journalism versus traditional reporting? How does it impact their lives? How do they put these thoughts into words? The truth is that most of the public just does not care. As Chapter 8 points out: "Those individuals who are interested in politics. . . should benefit significantly from election coverage that is more issue-oriented and from daily political coverage that points them in the direction of solutions rather than at intractable political problems." But for individuals who do not care about these issues, for those who seek entertainment rather than enlightenment, ". . . the information gap is likely to continue to grow, and the fragmentation of public life is likely to continue." Given that newspaper subscription rates have been in a free-fall since the 1960s, and given that much of the public seems much more familiar with the format of *The Jerry Springer Show* than with any format used by journalists to frame the discussion of public issues, it would be difficult to argue that people in great numbers really *do* care.

As a former print and broadcast journalist (13 years experience, including work as a public radio station news director who coordinated one of the 1994 NPR Election Project activities mentioned in Chapter 6) I am experienced enough to know that, for journalists, "the bottom line" is still the deciding factor in what reporters do and do not cover. Journalists who are fortunate enough to work in profitable organizations offering a popularly-accepted product

tend to have a lot of free rein to do the kinds of “community focused” work they want to do. Journalists working under economic constraints, or in struggling entities, or who are working for managers who think the route to good community journalism runs through the ad sales department are not so free.

Public Journalism and Political Knowledge is an enlightening read for any non-journalist who wants to learn more about how this news framework affects relationships between the media, the public, and politics. The book is understandable enough to work for general audiences, and yet thorough enough to be thought-provoking for even the most informed professional. Although concise enough to be digestible as an assigned text for a variety of courses in sociology or politics, the book is probably a little too deep in spots to be wholly relevant as assigned reading for any student other than a media scholar. Nevertheless, anyone who reads the book cover to cover cannot help but come away from the experience much more informed about public journalism, and much more anxious to see how the genre develops in the years to come.

Douglas J. Swanson
University of Wisconsin - La Crosse
La Crosse, WI 54601, USA